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The Queen's Latin

In his 1944 volume *William Shakespeare's Small Latine & Less Greeke* T. W. Baldwin showed that the claim made by Roger Ascham and her other tutors that Elizabeth Tudor was an accomplished Latinist, was largely false. But he did not go on to ask why the fiction that she was a Humanist-scholar became a stereotyped feature of her public image. In order to understand why this was so, it is necessary to bear in mind that Latin was the language of England's educated élite, a sector of society whose political loyalty and religious orthodoxy was needful for the good operation of the Tudor state. The government took both reactive steps to ensure this loyalty, such as press censorship and religious loyalty oaths, and also proactive ones, in the form of propaganda campaigns, and this helps explain why so much of the Latin literature written in England under Elizabeth and James was frankly political in content. The representation of Elizabeth as a proficient Latinist can be identified as a propaganda theme: Latin - English bilinguality was the distinctive (and highly prestigious) hallmark of England's educated meritocracy, and it would seem that the purpose of portraying her as an accomplished Latinist was to render her acceptable and palatable to the membership of this class. The image of the Humanist-queen bore with it the implication that, for all her superiority, she was somehow one of them, that somehow she shared, or at least sympathetically understood, their outlook, values, and aspirations. In the same way, the claim that she was well versed in Classical literature carried with it the implication that she shared with them a common formative body of knowledge. This representation of a sovereign as a learned Humanist was scarcely unique. But Elizabeth presented a special problem because of her gender. The educated classes comprised an almost exclusively masculine society, and it was necessary to carve out for Elizabeth a suitable place within this society. Or, more accurately, it was necessary to create for her the appearance of occupying such a place, in order to render her acceptable to a male meritocracy. In this context, it is important to realize that, for the members of England's educated classes, Latin was the language in which masculine socialization was both achieved and celebrated in literature; this representation brought her within the charmed circle, so that educated Englishman could form ties of affection and loyalty towards her based on psychological identification with a fellow Latinist.